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Maori's ritual body embellishments

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Abstract

The human body has always caused a lot of discussion in the world of science. Entering the social sphere, we can talk about perceiving people by taking into account their bodies. The consequence of human's body autotelism is usually improving its looks by adding make-up, clothing, jewelry and even by modifying the body. One of the forms of aforesaid modification is the tattoo, constant marking or composition of one or multi colored markings applied to any part of the body. Tattoo is made by inserting ink under the skin using different techniques. In New Zealand, in the Maori society we can meet many unique tattoo owners. Its originality is not only coming from the distinctive technique Maori are using to create tattoos, but also from a philosophical perspective. Concluding, the teams of experts should develop general standards for granting technical and honorary degrees, the requirements for a teaching license, etc. the general rules concerning the rights to educate.

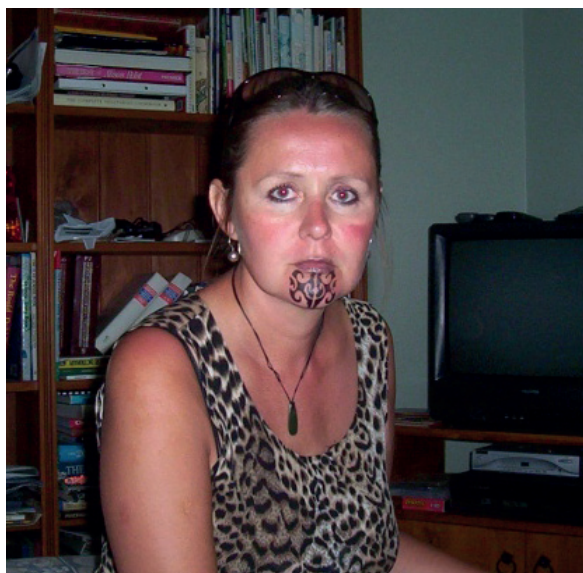
Maori from New Zealand are often shifting their identity from within their minds onto their bodies. The Art of Tattoo in Maori society is a distinguished example of the relation between owners of the markings inscribed on their skin with external world. The markings can also be the link connecting the owner with spiritual world and their ancestors. Tattoos are used to transmit information about their owner; markings made on the skin are not random and always have connection with the owner's life experience. It is a medium for cultural content, consolidates tradition. Tattoos can have magical and protective functions and are attributed with talisman's powers. In Maori outlook the body and the soul are bound together and interfere with each other, tattoos are seen as illustration of their owner's mind's and souls' state.

“In traditional communities, any kind of body modification was an element of Transition Rites. This is the moment of transition in the life of the initiates and it's important they remember this lesson. One

method to make the initiates remember is to write it on their own bodies [Kempny, Nowicka 2004, p. 412].

Taking up the subject-matter of the Maori's body embellishments is not random“[...] with regards to the evanesce of simple and isolated communities and their rapid transformation on the beginning of our century a practical argument came out testifying the necessity of carrying out anthropological research on such communities [...] Ignoring this argument is explicit with loss of only chance to become acquainted with rudimentary cultural diversity in face of the world's progressive cultural unification [Mullen 1997].

Tattoo is a cultural phenomenon, despite nowadays it is more of a beautifying endeavor, it is still used within many cultures as protection, has magical context, ennobling, religious or penal attributes. Often tattoos are the medium for cultural substance and are a communication system, which identifies and integrates. Among many communities tattoos carry a deep philosophical meaning. Tattoo



Pic 1. Dr Pawlik with characteristic Moko – kauae made with henna (Author's private collection)

is a ritual, emphasizes individuality and uniqueness. The art of body embellishment in the Maori from New Zealand Culture has a direct connection with individual's identity. Maori consider their bodies in a symbolic dimension, a symbolical message on the skin is necessary for both, the owner as the others. It is what links the relations with self, other people and the ancestors' ghosts.

The Art of Tattoo (called Moko) is coming back in the land of Aotearona in the recent years. Moko is the testimony of Maori identity. In recent years, a number of men and women have had Moko done on their faces. Women usual go for Moko kauae, meaning tattoo on the chin, *ngutuporoporo* which is mouth contour or *ngutupurua* – the whole mouth tattooed. Men tattoo their whole face (formerly Moko was a privilege of aristocracy, it was a sort of signature similar to European coat-of-arms). Apart from the face, men tattoo their thighs, buttocks (spiral motif called 'rape'), whole hands and arms, and rest of their body. Tattoos on these body parts were made by needling and injecting pigment under the skin. Women can get bands on their ankles and wrists, sometimes also breasts. Often women will get *hotiki* which stands for a tattoo between the eyebrows. Either for men and women there are cases of tattooing intimate body parts as well as the tongue.

Until present day Maori believe that the art of tattoo originated from the underworld. The legend says the chief named Mataora married Niwareka who was a daughter of Chief of Ue-tonga from Rarahenga in the underworld. After a marital squabble Niwareka came back to her father, and Mataora wanting to say sorry, went on a journey to the underworld to find his wife. To assimilate

with the people of underworld he tattooed his face with a natural pigment. His tattoo was wiped off and his father-in-law derided uselessness of his painted Moko Mataora asked Ue-tonga to engrave the tattoo on the body. Ue-tonga cut the lines on his body using chisel and a hammer, then he rubbed carbon pigment under the skin. In this way, Mataora after he came back to the upper world he passed the secret of making Moko [Orbell 1998, p. 81].

Initially the shape of the tattoos was limited only to the crossing of straight lines, but with time new curvy lines appeared. The curves were similar to characteristic shapes done in sculpture. A classical type of Moko shaped its form at the turn of 18th and 19th century. It was thoroughly described by English General H. G. Robley, expert in Maori Culture, author of exceptional work called "Moko or Maori Tattooing", London 1896... "primary elements of composition – according to Robley – were:

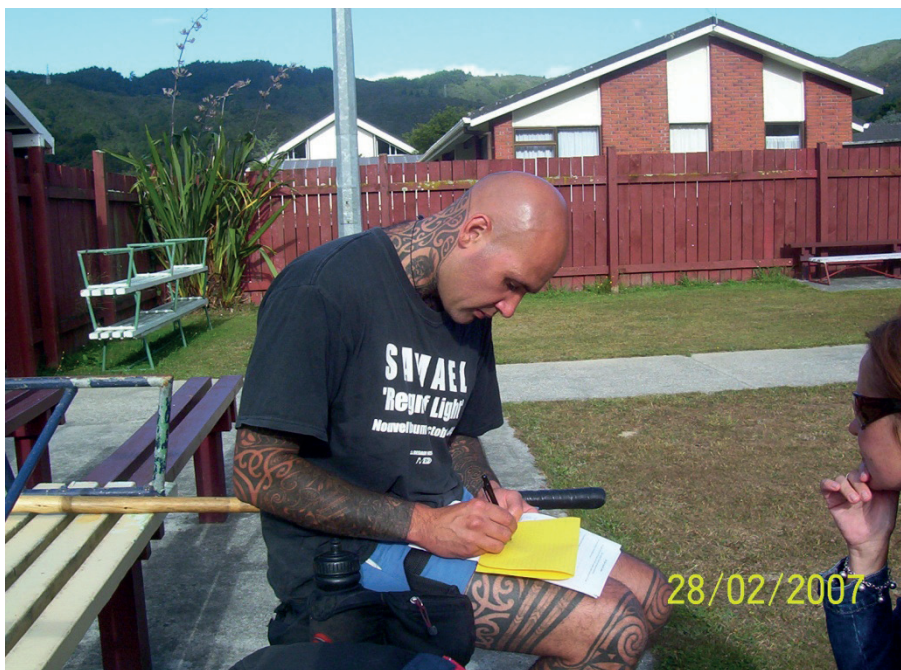
1. Spiral patterns on chin, called "pu-kauwae"
2. Series of parallel, curvy lines stretched from chin to nose, called "rerepehi"
3. Two large round spirals on cheek, called "paepae"
4. Spiral on the nose called "rerepi" and "pongianga"
5. Series of radial curvy lines stretching from nose radix, over eyebrows and falling towards the ears, called "tiwhana" [Jelski 2007].

A spiral motif on top of the forehead – *ipurangi*.
Small spirals applied to nose base – *titi*

According to David Roy Simmons, the line and symbol patterns applied on the face with Moko, described specific characteristics of the tattooed man.

1. *Nagakaipikirau* – Social rank (forehead middle)
2. *Ngunga* – Social rank (forehead sides)
3. *Uirere* – tribal membership (around eyes)
4. *Uma* – first or next marriage (temples)
5. *Raurau* – Name (nose)
6. *Taiohou* – occupation (chicks)
7. *Wairura* – Soul, strength and mana (chin)
8. *Taitoto* – social rank at the moment of birth (lips) [Simmsen 1986].

The way how the Moko is made is an evidence of how important experience for the Maori being tattooed is. Traditionally, tattooing can only happen after maturing, once the skin has hardened. During the operation, chisel cuts the skin what causes quite extensive bleeding. Because of that, plus the pain and the swelling the pattern is made in a few phases. When the tattoo is being applied to mouth or chin, the patient must be fed using a funnel after the operation. Tattoo experts usually carry out the operation in the open air, to avoid patients faint, and additionally there are people who sing special songs (called *waiata*) that should



Pic 2. Dr Pawlik with Maori warrior (Interview) (Author's private collection)



Pic 3. Dr Pawlik with Simon Hirni (Interview) (Author's private collection)

decrease the pain. An expert is using a chisel in the shape of a small carpenter axe, usually made of albatross' wing bone, embedded into a wooden handle. This axe cuts the skin by being struck with a small hammer. The sharp edge of the axe cuts the skin making a groove limited on sides by the skin edges. So called "Combs" (notched chisel) is used for more complicated cuts and for permanent filling the pattern with color. During the operation, wounds are bleeding heavily. Traditionally the blood is wiped with a soft linen flax. The pigment is prepared by burning down Kauri tree resin

(conifer tree) with addition of dog excrement fed with special wood carbon. The characteristics of Maori from New Zealand tattoo make it practically impossible to remove. In fact it is engraved in the skin. Tattooing process could take up to couple of days. During that time, there were rules to obey. Both, the expert and the person being tattooed had to sustain sexual abstinence – they were untouchable due to the blood contact between them. The tattooed person was not allowed to speak or touch anybody. Usually, the tattoo was applied during the adolescence period, as the act of tattoo



Pic. 4. Traditional tattoo making (Author's private collection)

was also connected with the transition phase. The tattoo ceremony was taboo.

The art of traditional tattoo is still very popular on the lands of New Zealand. In many places days called *Wananga* are being organized. During *Wananga* artists offer their services. It is a matter of regaining identity and the rebirth of Maori beauty and aesthetics. Even nowadays making Moko is a sign of maturity and also accentuation of radical changes or happenings in life, e.g. (quitting a habit). For many, Moko is a manifestation of what they do or want to do in their lives. A tattoo can also manifest tribal membership (*iwi*). Often people talk about a special kind of sensuality and attraction when wearing Moko. One of the Maori told me that not all markings and tattoos need to carry a message, because tattoo itself has Mana (might/power) [Nowicka 1997, pp. 440-441]. Body covered by tattoos became sanctified, and the head was the most revered. The head was considered, similar to most cultures, to be the main part of human body, the center of feelings and soul. The heads of great warriors or chiefs were admired after their death. Heads were embalmed and kept to preserve their Mana.

In case of the Maori, the dualism theory and the will to separate body (*res extense*) from mind and feelings (*res cogitans*) does not seem to apply.

Body and soul are one until death, when the soul is still travelling the path of Tane to the gods

who created it. Soul is not a subject to death anymore and lives forever among gods. Physical remains are buried in the bosom of nature, however, in the pre-European times those could be consumed by the members of the tribe, in most cases this applied to the chief's remains. Maori cannibalism was of a ritual character and originated from mythology. Eating bodies allowed to possess the characteristics of the deceased. Cannibalism was also sort of the revenge brought upon the fallen enemies.

Maori's body and the story inscribed on it are inseparable with the spirituality. The state of soul, will, freedom, consciousness are channeled via tattoos. The inner identity is brought to the exterior surface. The pattern engraved in the skin often is a form of emphasizing the inner stability, completion of a certain stage in life or achieving a specified goal.

The Maori emphasize that making a tattoo cannot be random, and cannot be treated as another whim. Each and every tattoo is a lasting medium for information about the wearer. Before Maori learned writing, tattoos were records and transmitters of knowledge, history and tradition and the markings engraved in the wearer's body were an original method of recording (events, origins). Apart from the practical aspect of tattoo, it should not be forgotten about its spiritual and community meaning of the Maori from New Zealand tribes. Present iterates past, past experiences are how current people perceive present. The ones living



Pic. 5. Characteristic patterns (Sculpture in Abel Tasman, South Island) (Author private collection)

currently, are instances of entities of the same kind existing in the past. This relation is the essence of inheritance for Maori. This means the relation between an ancestor and descendant. For Maori the whole universe is a gigantic family originating from the same ancestor.

Maori describe their future as *nga ra o mua* – days ahead, and the past as *kei muri* – days behind. They pace into the future with eyes stuck in the past. They transfer past into present and future. Main cultural relations are handed down within the community from the initial myth to tribal and

clan legends. From legends to family stories that are handed down for generations using symbols, proverbs, names, tattoo patterns containing reference to the ancestors. This is why the most common tattoo pattern is the spiral, being a symbol of infinity and the magical *Mana*.

The Maori often emphasize they are gathering their *Mana* from the world of Ancestors' ghosts. For Maori, their body (skin) is used to transfer elements of their soul. Past and future mix up and make infinity. Some ethnographers tried to relate the genesis of characteristic spiral pattern of the Maori tattoo with New Zealand's aborigines. K. von Den Steinen, a subject expert from Germany wrote that the tattoo named *Moko* – in Maori dialect means a lizard, it was supposed to picture curvy legs of “Sacred Lizard”, considered to be the Ghost of Ancestors, that the islanders feared. *Moko* – according to von Den Steinen – composed culture of the ancestors. “

The German scientist mentioned above, by analyzing naming conventions related with tattooing activities, functioning among different Polynesian dialects, came to the conclusion that this operation can be considered as a relic of ancient practice of blood sacrifice to the gods. Other researchers considered that the tattoos are related with totemic religion, making the act of tattoo a cultural matter, and the tattoo itself – a totem.

M. Jackson, contemporary researcher of the Maori culture, in his work called *Aspects of Symbolism and Composition in Maori Art*, Auckland 1972 quoted a few important facts that in his opinion made sense of the *Moko*.

1. It was a durable make-up.



Pic. 6. Youth cultivating the Moko tradition, temporary facial painting (Author's private collection)

2. It eased identification of the chiefs as well as tribal membership.
3. *Moko* guaranteed its owner that he is a full featured member of a tribe.
4. *Moko* hid the actual age of a tribe member by emphasizing natural face lines.
5. *Moko* is somewhere in between the impermanent painting and enduring craving. It therefore acts as a link between the natural ways of things, that are subject to final destruction and cultural ways of things – that are continuous and enduring [Jelski 2007, p. 86].

Adducing to anthropology and traditional cultures is an expression of fascination with exotics, desire of authenticity and return to the roots. Also it is a part of wider phenomena of – seeking the ritual [Kempny, Nowicka 2004]. During my a few-month-long journey across New Zealand, more than once I have witnessed transfer of the patterns seen on traditional sculptures into tattoo (annotation by Jack Malcolm – Maori Art). It should be also noted that the patterns are carved into human skin, using a similar technique to those that are carved onto sculptures. The tattoos of the Maori from New Zealand, are subject to fascination, and the people wearing them constitute a living form of art – Kahi tara.

Summarizing, we can certainly discuss the phenomena of a ritual body embellishments, in its artistic aspect – it is a variety of patterns, a method of making and unusual styles. However, the most important aspect is its spiritual and social meaning. Body embellishments in many communities fulfilled and still fulfill crucial roles, often decisive on life and health of an individual but also the whole tribe.

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Maoryskie rytualne upiększanie ciała

Słowa kluczowe: Maorys, ciało, tradycja, tatuaż

Streszczenie

Maoryskie tatuaże stanowią od wielu lat przedmiot fascynacji antropologów, socjologów i artystów.

Niezwykłe wzory i tradycyjne metody wykonywania tatuaży spowodowały, że zdobienia ciała Maorysów zostały uznane za jedno z najbardziej oryginalnych na świecie.

Znaczenie tatuaży jest tym większe, że często poprzez ich wykonanie transferuje się wewnątrz duszy posiadacza na zewnątrz. Skóra jest nośnikiem zakodowanej informacji o posiadaczu tatuaży, a każdy wzór jest zapisem w kontekście dziejów jego przodków, iwi (plemienia), rodziny i jego samego. Fascynacja ciałem i jego zdobieniami była i pozostaje motywacją dla wielu społeczeństw w poszukiwaniu wiedzy i piękna, ozdabiania ciała: tatuaże skaryfikacje i inne techniki były i pozostają dla wielu społeczeństw transparentnym przekazem wartości kulturowych.

Zgodnie z zasadą komplementarności ten rodzaj przekazu implikuje idee, że ciało pozostaje rewersem umysłu. W większości społeczeństw pierwotnych pewne wartości były szczególnie cenione, do takich z pewnością należą maoryskie tatuaże, dziedziczone z pokolenia na pokolenie, przekazywane w czasie i przestrzeni przetrwały do czasów współczesnych a społeczeństwa postindustrialne doceniły ich wyjątkowe walory.